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Substantive session of 1997

PROVISIONAL SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 43rd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 25 July 1997, at 3 p.m.

President: Mr. CHOWDHURY (Bangladesh)
(Vice-President)

CONTENTS

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (continued)

NEW AND INNOVATIVE IDEAS FOR GENERATING FUNDS (continued)

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS (continued)

SUSPENSION OF THE SUBSTANTIVE SESSION OF 1997

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In the absence of Mr. Galuska (Czech Republic), Mr. Chowdhury (Bangladesh), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.25 p.m.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (agenda item 13) (continued) (E/1997/L.51, E/1997/90)

The PRESIDENT invited the Council to resume its consideration of the draft resolution on the participation of non-governmental organizations in the General Assembly (E/1997/L.51).

The Council decided to defer consideration of the draft resolution contained in document E/1997/L.51 pending the outcome of the deliberations on that issue at the fifty-second session of the General Assembly, but not later than the 1998 Organizational Session of the Council, without prejudice to the relevant decision of the General Assembly on the issue. The Council also decided to recommend to the General Assembly that it give early consideration to that issue.

The PRESIDENT suggested that the Council should take note of the report of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations (E/1997/90).

It was so decided.

NEW AND INNOVATIVE IDEAS FOR GENERATING FUNDS (agenda item 14) (continued) (A/52/203-E/1997/85)

The PRESIDENT suggested that the Council should take note of the report of the Secretary-General on new and innovative ideas for generating funds for globally agreed commitments and priorities (A/52/203-E/1997/85).

It was so decided.

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS (agenda item 1) (continued)

The PRESIDENT read out the list of issues which would be before the resumed session of the Council for its consideration:

1. Themes for the high-level and coordination segments;
2. Action on four draft decisions from the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;
3. Implementation of General Assembly resolution 50/227 (recommendations contained in the report of the Secretary-General (E/1997/68));
4. Bureau of the Commission on Sustainable Development;
5. Review of subsidiary bodies, as per General Assembly resolution 50/227;

6. Draft resolution E/1997/L.32 (proclamation of international years);

7. Draft resolution E/1997/L.43 (International Standards of Accounting and Reporting);

8. Draft resolution E/1997/L.52 (NGOs);

9. Elections.

Mr. CRUZ DE MELLO (Brazil) asked whether a decision on the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests was not also pending.

Mr. ASADI (Observer for the Islamic Republic of Iran) pointed out that the matter was not pending. What the Council had already decided was to hold a first organizational session from 1 to 3 October 1997. It had also decided that the Forum would recommend to the Council the number, venue and duration of substantive sessions, after which the Council could be reconvened at any time to adopt the decision.

The PRESIDENT said that the Forum would be added to the list of issues, and items 7 and 8 would be deleted.

In view of the decision of the Commission on Sustainable Development to elect its Bureau six months prior to the session, the Council might have to meet sooner, once the choice of Bureau members had been agreed upon by the regional groups. Consultations would continue on the matter.

As to the dates for the Council's resumed session, the Bureau had decided it would be preferable to hold the session immediately after the general debate in the General Assembly and before the Second and Third Committees met. The Secretariat had advised that, for the forthcoming General Assembly session, there would be no gap between the conclusion of the general debate and the beginning of the work of the Second and Third Committees. Accordingly, the Bureau had decided that a formal request should be made to the President of the General Assembly and, through him or her, to the General Committee to schedule the work of the Second and Third Committees in such a way as to give the Council five days between the general debate and the beginning of their work. If that failed, another alternative would be to call the resumed session following the conclusion of the work of the Second and Third Committees.

The Council decided to adopt the recommendations of the Bureau on the dates for the resumed session.

Mr. PEDROSO CUESTA (Cuba) said that, had his delegation been present at the plenary meeting on 24 July 1997 during the discussion of the report of the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC), it would have expressed reservations on some of the recommendations contained in the report. His country fully supported the relevance of CPC, but the modality of CPC's work, based on consensus, prevented adequate treatment of all the questions under its mandate. Cuba's reservations pertained particularly to the recommendations concerning the programme of work for the Economic and Social Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on follow-up to the Americas Summit in Miami. ECLAC was not part of the inter-American system and therefore did not have to follow the mandate of a system outside the United Nations, especially the inter-American system.

SUSPENSION OF THE SUBSTANTIVE SESSION OF 1997

The PRESIDENT said there had been a number of firsts during the present session of the Council. It was the first time the Council had negotiated the agreed conclusions of the high-level segment and adopted them by consensus. It was also the first time the Council had been represented at full ministerial level by more than 50 per cent of the membership. Furthermore, the duration of the session had been reduced by one week. Both the number of documents and the number of pages had been reduced by 15 per cent over 1996 and, owing to the constructive spirit that had prevailed, the Council had successfully completed a heavy agenda. Mr. Galuska, the President, who had had to leave early for health reasons, had provided outstanding leadership. While the Council had not had the opportunity to address reform issues directly, the spirit of the session had been animated by a desire for effectiveness and efficiency in promoting international development cooperation. That augured for a strengthened role of the Council within the United Nations system.

Many occasions had been afforded for informal, interactive get-togethers and free-flowing dialogues and exchanges. In particular, the working breakfast with the Secretary-General had set an important tradition that should be continued in the future for the purposeful involvement of the Secretary-General in the Council process. The panel discussions with actors from the business and academic worlds, as well as with Executive Heads of the United Nations Funds and Programmes, the Executive Secretaries of the Regional

Commissions and other leaders of the United Nations system on major themes such as the enabling environment, funding of operational activity, review of the Regional Commissions, coordinated follow-up to conferences and mainstreaming a gender perspective, had provided opportunities for real dialogue, enriched the debates and brought fresh insights, thus making the work of the Council more relevant to the real issues facing the world. There was, however, a need for more interactive dialogue within the Council.

The agreed conclusions, while representing an important step in making the Council's work more relevant and effective, should have been adopted during the high-level segment itself. In future, it would be desirable to begin preparations for the conclusions well before the high-level debate, so that at least a basic outline and skeleton were available at the outset. While the high-level debate had yielded many interesting and thought-provoking statements, the segment still suffered from lack of dialogue and was still too much of a forum for giving statements.

Among the many elements in the debate at the high-level segment, two had stood out. Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) had received a shot in the arm. Not only had the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund called it the best investment in the future of the human family, but a number of donors had confirmed their commitment to increasing their allocations to ODA. The other new element - policy coherence - had generated considerable interest. The need for harmonizing trade, investment, aid and environmental policies was becoming increasingly apparent. In that regard, the discussion on subsidies had been particularly noteworthy, considering the sensitivities involved.

Regarding the coordination segment, since the adoption of the 1995 agreed conclusions, the Council had been able to play an increasingly important role in guiding the work of its subsidiary machinery, particularly with respect to the coordinated follow-up to major United Nations conferences. While the Council was increasingly able to exercise oversight of its subsidiary machinery in terms of harmonization of work programmes and a better division of follow-up, its effectiveness would be further increased if its ability to monitor and follow up its decisions were enhanced. Some mechanisms for following up the Council's agreed conclusions did exist, but they should perhaps be deepened and made more productive.

As far as the operational activities segment was concerned, the principal focus had been on the themes of resources, field and regional level coordination and capacity-building. At the high-level meeting, the grave resource situation had been noted by most participants and a range of proposals had been reviewed, including the proposal for a three-tiered funding mechanism. On field coordination, the discussion had been deepened through an exchange with two panels of country teams in Cambodia and Senegal. Particular attention had been devoted to the functioning of the resident coordinator system. Careful consideration needed to be given to how to strengthen the Council's oversight functions vis-à-vis the Executive Boards of the Funds and Programmes, more particularly with regard to across-the-board and cross-sectoral policy issues. The Secretary-General's note identifying those issues had not evoked a response from the Council. The Council's resolution provided guidance on further examination of funding arrangements by the Executive Boards of the Funds and Programmes and on the examination by the next session of the Assembly of funding modalities with the aim of placing core resources on a more secure and predictable basis. The resolution also provided guidance in capacity-building and lay the foundations for the upcoming triennial policy review of operation activities in 1998.

As to the general segment, the Council had decided to hold a session on integrated and coordinated follow-up to recent United Nations conferences and summits in the spring of 1998. While a wide range of issues had been addressed during the general segment and an impressive volume of work completed, the segment suffered from a dispersed and unfocused agenda. Further thought needed to be given to how the Council could streamline its work on that segment.

Mr. MEYER (Luxembourg), speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that the European Union welcomed the quality of the discussions held during the Council's first four-week session and of the agreed conclusions adopted with regard to mainstreaming a gender perspective into United Nations policies and programmes.

While the format of many reports had been improved by clear identification of issues which called for Council action and for concrete recommendations, the Council was still adopting too many reports and resolutions submitted by subsidiary bodies without adequate consideration.

Increased rationalization of the agenda would allow the Council to devote more time to issues on which it could make a contribution within the framework of its mandate for coordination and guidance. There must be a clearer division of roles between the Council and its subsidiary bodies. It was unfortunate that differences of opinion in the functional commissions had been continued in the Council. For example, the report of one of the Special Rapporteurs, which had been mentioned by several delegations, had already been dealt with by the Commission on Human Rights. The European Union reiterated its support for the independence of the Special Rapporteurs and the mechanisms established by the Commission.

Success in the Council's work required a high degree of commitment from all members of the Bureau. Preparation for the Council's session, particularly the ministerial segments, should begin at an earlier date, and the agreed conclusions adopted by the ministers at the end of the high-level segment should be more focused on important issues, more action-oriented and more closely related to the actual debate. It was also essential for reports to be published in the official languages well before discussion in plenary session. The process of rationalization and restructuring of the agenda must continue, and the Bureau should draw attention to those problems and suggest solutions in the report mandated by General Assembly resolution 50/227.

Mr. MCHUMO (Observer for the United Republic of Tanzania), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, endorsed the President's concluding remarks and said that the success of the Council's current session had been a result of excellent leadership and a spirit of give and take on the part of delegations. He welcomed the agreed conclusions, particularly those which had followed the high-level segment, and their focus on the needs of the developing and, in particular, the least developed countries. He hoped that those conclusions would not remain a dead letter but would allow the Council to provide dynamic guidance resulting in action on behalf of the people of those countries.

Mr. CABACTULAN (Philippines) said his delegation hoped that the quality of the Council's dialogue with the Heads of Funds and Programmes and financial and trade institutions would continue at future sessions.

Mr. AARDAL (Observer for Norway) said he hoped that his statement of the previous day, of which no mention had been made in the Journal, would be reflected in the official record.

While his delegation deeply appreciated Mr. Chowdhury's single-handed contribution to the Council's deliberations during the latter part of its session, it was deeply concerned about the organizational process which had led to that situation and hoped that all members would do their utmost to ensure that the Council could play its proper role.

Mr. WINNICK (United States of America) said that, while progress had been made in revitalization of the Council, much remained to be done. The high-level, operational activities and coordination segments had been a success owing to the quality of the documentation and dialogue and, in the case of gender mainstreaming, because extensive discussion and negotiation had taken place prior to the substantive session. However, it was unfortunate that the high-level segment had resulted, not in concise agreed conclusions, but in four weeks of negotiation which had made no contribution to the intergovernmental process and had provided no guidance to the United Nations system. If that segment was to attract high-level attention and have some impact, the Council must agree to negotiate the conclusions in advance.

The general segment showed yet again that more work was necessary if the Council was to perform a useful function. Oversight and governance must be provided for an extraordinary range of subsidiary bodies. Reports must be received in a timely fashion so that they could be reviewed by experts in the national capitals. Furthermore, delegations must remember that the Council was not a junior version of the General Assembly, but rather a principal coordination body of the United Nations. Its members must set aside their legislative functions and allow more time for deliberation rather than negotiate from a standard position on a stock set of issues. In that regard, his delegation was encouraged by the work accomplished under agenda item 5, on coordinated follow-up to conferences.

The Council must find a way to continue its operations throughout the year, perhaps through open Bureau meetings, and to make better use of its organizational segment. In addition to changing its own work habits, the Council would need the support of a reinforced and focused secretariat.

Mr. NERYENZIA (Russian Federation) said that, while his delegation considered the present session to have been a success, a comprehensive assessment must nonetheless await the conclusion of the resumed session and the end of the General Assembly. The Council could not, in fact, be said to have concluded its work in four weeks, since the session was being suspended rather than closed. It was gratifying that the Council had, for the first time, adopted agreed conclusions to the high-level segment. Unlike the representative of the United States, he thought that the resulting document was a good one, but regretted that the negotiations leading to consensus had taken up almost the entire session and that it had been impossible to give serious consideration to certain issues. The Council's agenda must be streamlined so that matters directly related to its mandate could be given the attention they deserved and so that General Assembly resolution 50/227 could be fully implemented.

Mr. KAABACHI (Tunisia) said he wished that the President had mentioned in his closing remarks the statement made by the President of the General Assembly during the high-level debate.

The PRESIDENT said that that omission would be remedied in the final record.

Mr. SOKOL (Czech Republic) thanked all those who had conveyed to his delegation their best wishes for Mr. Galuska's speedy recovery.

After the customary exchange of courtesies, the PRESIDENT declared the substantive session of 1997 suspended.

The meeting rose at 4.30 p.m.